

## **Group puts city on the road to long-term thinking**

May 31, 2009

Matthew Tully

The Indianapolis Star

It didn't attract much attention, but a meeting in a Downtown public school gym one night last week might have been the start of something big.

Let's hope it was.

Ultimately, though, it will be big only if Indianapolis voters can accept some difficult decisions and reward -- or at least not punish -- those politicians who dare to think about the long-term future of the city.

The good news is that the meeting was about the basics of city government. Nuts-and-bolts stuff. Not stadiums, but real-world issues such as roads, sidewalks and bridges, and the city's alleys, sewers and parks.

As Mayor Greg Ballard said at the start of the meeting, "Anyone who has walked, biked or driven in the city understands" the issue.

With about 50 people in the audience, last week's meeting was the first for the new Infrastructure Advisory Commission, a small but impressive group of business and academic minds. Ballard has asked the group to look at the city's massive infrastructure needs and examine potential ways to pay for them.

Of course, such a committee will never have the profile of the Capital Improvement Board. But it could prove to be much more important to residents. Few local issues, after all, are more troubling than the deteriorating condition of the city's roads, sidewalks and other infrastructure.

How daunting is the problem?

The costs are staggering, Michael Huber, the city's director of enterprise development, told the panel. He went through a slide presentation showing the costs: More than \$1.5 billion to bring city streets, bridges, sidewalks and alleys "to acceptable condition." Once you add sewers and septic tank elimination, the figure reaches \$5 billion.

"All of these estimates are pretty sobering," said IUPUI Dean of Liberal Arts Bill Blomquist, a commission member and an expert on groundwater issues.

There's no easy answer to the question of how to pay to fix what is a generation-long infrastructure backlog. Still, Ballard deserves credit for putting the commission together and digging into the problem.

If he can take a decent-sized bite out of it, and, more important, devise a long-term strategy to deal with the issue, he'll have gone a long way toward answering the pesky vision question that has dogged him.

"The first step in solving a problem," he said last week, "is identifying it."

So the group's first tasks will be to determine what needs to be fixed and to set priorities. Then it's on to the much more challenging job of finding a way to pay for it all.

Although Ballard isn't inclined to raise taxes for infrastructure, the commission will study a wide range of revenue-generating possibilities. They could include privatizing parking meters and selling unneeded assets. The city also could open up money for streets and sidewalks by reducing the cost of ongoing sewer projects.

The process won't be easy. And it won't be cheap. But if done right, it would show vision -- and an example of government focusing on its core mission.

---